

Cerebral: An Anthology Series

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Thesis Advisor

Rod Smith

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Smith', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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ABSTRACT:

This author's statement will detail my journey to create an anthology television series called *Cerebral*. In order to fully understand the development of this series, I must delve back into the past to recall the beginnings of my filmmaking career with Versa Studios Media, LLC. This is a company that produces cerebral, sci-fi content that is always looking to explore the age-old question of "What if"? This author's statement will explore the pre-production, principal photography, and post-production processes involved with creating the *Cerebral* anthology. It will also recall the exciting discovery of finding the perfect Video On Demand model to distribute our content for the world to see.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank our honors advisor, Rod Smith, for being a great mentor for us as we made the journey to create this anthology series. I would like to thank all of the cast and crew involved, especially the Versa interns. They were instrumental in getting the *Cerebral* series off the ground. I would also like to thank Kenneth Stevenson, CEO of Versa Studios Media, LLC, for serving as a mentor and a friend for Dylan and myself.

Cerebral is an anthology television series that was co-created by Ball State University Alumnus Kenneth Stevenson and myself back in the summer of 2013. Dylan Pieri (a series producer) and myself decided to combine our efforts in making this our senior honors thesis due to the fact that we already spend countless hours outside of the classroom working on it. In fact, I think it's safe to say that almost any free time we have is spent on our filmmaking endeavors. The company behind *Cerebral* is Versa Studios Media, LLC, a production company / agency that was founded by Kenneth back in the spring semester of 2011. Having the opportunity to work with Versa has opened up many doors of opportunity for both Dylan and myself. It's taken four years, but I can now say that I am in a state of educational nirvana, where my passions for filmmaking and entrepreneurship can directly coincide with the classroom.

I'd like to give a little background on Versa Studios Media, LLC and shed some light on how I got involved. In doing so, I'll be taking you back to my freshman year at Ball State University. Originally from Morris, Illinois, the telecommunications / journalism program is what originally drew my attention to Muncie. I wanted to be a new broadcaster, and Ball State's state of the art facilities really attracted me. Around the end of my first semester, I got a call from one of my roommates best friends, Ben Kruis, who wanted me to act in one of his short films. As someone who thrives on spontaneity, I agreed to help him out. This one seemingly insignificant decision changed my life forever. The short film, *Dreamorph*, ended up winning a short film contest at the Johnson B dormitory Complex. The shock and excitement that I felt from that night was all it would take to make me change my major from TCOM / Journalism to TCOM / Video

Production. Soon after I was producing / co-directing with Kruis on another short film called *REM*, which garnered the attention of Public Relations major Dylan Pieri. Dylan and I had Spanish class together, and he came up to me one day after class, which lead to his involvement in the project as a writer / actor / producer. Right around the time that we finished *REM*, Kenneth had just won the David Letterman Scholarship for a music video, and he was excited about starting a new business venture. Impressed with *REM*, he asked Dylan and myself if we would be interested in being involved with a new production company, and that company would soon become Versa Studios Media, LLC.

My involvement in Versa increased significantly over time. Over the course of four years, I ended up directing, writing, and producing over twenty short films. I was also given the incredible opportunity to be the Associate Producer on a feature length film, called *Cheery Point*. This film was a dystopian, sci-fi thriller that we made for about 30,000 dollars. Our crew sacrificed the college lifestyle by traveling on the weekends to take part in the wildest journey of our lives. But that's a story for another time. What is important to tell is that *Cheery Point* was picked up by a distributor by the name of ITN Distribution. Acquiring distribution is the goal of every independent filmmaker, and for us, it helped to solidify that while we were a young company, we were a talented one. It was also the catalyst in prompting Kenneth, Dylan and myself to begin developing a new television series. Kenneth and I shared the same love for ABC's hit television series *Lost*. Although we are a lover of movies also, television is where our true passions lie. We both feel like television's longform storytelling structure has the potential for character development that films simply cannot create. *Lost* introduced us to characters that we got to spend time with each week. The intimacy of television,

combined with the amount of time that actors spend in specific roles, means that viewers can become far more invested in television characters than film characters. Although Kenny, Dylan and I didn't feel comfortable contracting actors for two to three years at a time, we felt that it was a smart idea to weasel our way into the television industry in some way. This is when we came up with the idea to start with an anthology.

An anthology series is one in which several different short films (episodes) are tied together by only a single theme, premise, or brief interlocking event. In the case of *Cerebral*, it is an anthology series that has unrelated stories that are connected by an overall theme of "What If?" Kenneth, Dylan, and myself are firm believers in the idea that mystery is what drives a story forward. We wish for our audiences to hone in on the thought provoking questions and themes each presents. On the flip side, some of the most entertaining days spent within Versa come as a result of asking questions ourselves. We pitch our ideas around a big table, similar to a business pitch meeting. I can recall the pitch meeting for our second *Cerebral* short *Replica*; we began to ask questions like "What if the not so distant opens up the ability to clone human beings?" This was a good starting point, but we felt we needed to dig a little bit deeper to find a more personal story. Ok so "What if a young girl in this future has a fatal disease, and the only way to save her life is to harvest her clone for organs?" Over the last four years of working with Versa, I've come to realize that the best stories are often the most simple and personal. Tightening the focus on a story is also a brilliant way to save money. For example, our first *Cerebral* installment, *Rust*, is set in a post apocalyptic world where a zombie-like infection has taken over. Since our team doesn't have the financial means to make a *World War Z* like blockbuster, we had to tell a majority of our story in the more intimate

setting of a house. In order to continue on with more details regarding *Cerebral*, I must shed some light on the Versa Internship Program. Without the installation of this program at the beginning of the year, none of this would have been possible.

Big decisions were made this past summer that set the stage for the *Cerebral* anthology. By the end of the previous year (2012 / 2013), Versa Studios Media, LLC was declining in crew members, and we were unsatisfied with the number of films we were cranking out. Over the summer, Kenneth, Dylan, and myself came up with the idea of creating an actual internship program, which would have individual chapters around college campuses. By doing so, we could increase our numbers while creating a hands-on, professional filmmaking experience for those involved. The intern programs would also provide the company with a pool of talent from which we could recruit for larger projects like *Cheery Point*. Dylan and I knew that if we took on this project we would have to develop systems that would be easily understood for each chapter we set up. Thus, we created an official handbook of 20 pages that explained not only what the program was, but also program specifics, requirements for interns, on-set protocol, contract information, and communication and safety tips. This was an incredible undertaking, and we if we were going to do it, we wanted to do it the right way. Because the internship is unpaid, we did our research and found that there are actually six stipulations mandated by the federal law in regards to offering unpaid internships. They are as follows:

1. *The internship, even though it includes actual operation of the facilities of the employer, is similar to training which would be given in an educational environment.*

2. *The internship experience is for the benefit of the intern.*
3. *The intern does not displace regular employees, but works under close supervision of existing staff.*
4. *The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern; and on occasion its operations may actually be impeded.*
5. *The intern is not necessarily entitled to a job at the conclusion of the internship.*
6. *The employer and the intern understand that the intern is not entitled to wages for the time spent in the internship.*

In order to follow these stipulations to a tee, Dylan and I set up an advisory board for each chapter, which would oversee meetings and ensure that things were being done the right way. I served as the first President of the Muncie chapter, while Dylan served as the VP of Marketing. One of the aspects of our program that I am most proud of is the fact that we now offer college credit since Ball State has deemed it appropriate and applicable. Sonny Wingler, who is in charge of internships through the TCOM program, is our point of contact for these matters. With the set-up of our internship program, Versa was now ready to put things into motion starting with the *Cerebral* anthology.

Kenny, Dylan, and I always saw *Cerebral* as a series that would take our company to new heights. In the past, Versa Studios Media, LCC would upload all of its content to Youtube / Vimeo channels, which suited us well for a couple of years. Many of our videos would get a high amount of likes and a great number of views; however, over time we began to feel like we were hitting a wall, with the other side being next big step. Why couldn't we create something marketable? We had already proven with

Cheery Point that we could find distribution, but we recognized that television is a different ball game. People go to the movie theaters, video stores, Redbox, etc. to pay for feature films, not usually to pay for TV. The market for television is currently blowing up on VOD (video on demand). Movie moguls like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas have also predicted that VOD is the future for movies as well as TV. They are predicting that Hollywood as we know it is going to implode, leading to ticket prices skyrocketing to 50 to 100 dollars a pop. Only the wealthy will be able to afford going to the movies (similar to Broadway), pushing a majority of content to be watched on VOD. This fall, we decided that VOD was where we were going to make our mark with *Cerebral*. We simply had to find the right outlet for us.

Our first *Cerebral* installment, *Rust*, was filmed at the beginning of the 2013 / 2014 school year. This is the one installment that already had a screenplay ready, instead of our team pitching ideas beforehand. Now a Ball State alumnus, Anton Barnett wrote a screenplay titled *Rust* back when he was still a student. The synopsis for the film is as follows: *“Following an apocalyptic infection, a father must race against the clock to bring his infected son, Damien, back to humanity by feeding him memories of his past. While his attempts seem to show signs of progress, he also becomes infected, narrowing the gap to complete the cognitive recharge for Damien.”* Kenny, Dylan, and I liked the screenplay so much that we decided to talk to Anton about the possibility of letting us shoot it. While we loved the story, we felt that in order for it to fit our *Cerebral* series perfectly, we would need Anton to make some adjustments. It’s always difficult to see your story get altered in any way, but Anton was excited to see his vision come off the page and onto the screen. It was a mutually beneficial agreement from both parties. My

role on *Rust* was as the Executive Producer, and pre-production was where I spent most of my hours. Dylan served as the First Assistant Director. As the Executive Producer, I didn't really have one specific duty that I needed to fulfill. I basically took on the position of "overseeing" the project from pre-production, through principal photography, into post-production, and finally, to completion. There was a great deal of stress involved with this position, because I would often be receiving phone calls, emails, facebook, messages, and texts all at the same time. One of Dylan's jobs was to help me as a location scout to find location for the film. We needed an old, dilapidated house that looked like it would look natural in an apocalyptic setting. Luckily, finding run down houses in a college town isn't too difficult. Dylan found a house that was being rented out by one of our fraternity brothers, and after taking a look, I made the final call that we would move forward with it. When it comes to filmmaking, I have found that using resources from people you know and trust is essential.

Another important job I had as the Executive Producer was solidifying the cast and crew. With about twenty-five active interns at the time, there weren't enough spots on *Rust's* crew list to fit every intern. Unfortunately, a few of the interns would have to wait their turn until the second installment came February. We had twenty-two crew-members on set during principal photography. Even though we only needed four actors on set, casting for *Rust* proved more difficult than I had anticipated. The easiest actor to cast was my younger brother, Sam, as I knew of his abilities, and he was the right age for the role of Damien. Casting for Keith and Bree, his father and mother, was difficult because a majority of the actors we contacted were unsure of their schedules. We went back and forth on actors, and while we were trying to stay away from using the

same actors we used on *Cheery Point*, we had to give in. Thankfully, they fit the roles well and gave good performances. The most interesting casting call was that of six-year-old Hayden Evans, who played a younger version of Damien. After searching in all the wrong places, we eventually put out a casting call to Muncie schools, and we received an email back from Hayden's father. We only needed him for two scenes, and his father came with him and stayed on set with us until he was done. Dylan helped to take care of the contracts involved. My job on set was just to oversee the jobs of every cast and crew member. If I saw grips slacking, I got them back in line. If I saw that an actor needed something to eat, I made sure to make it happen. We wrapped principal photography in two days, and while I was pleased with the quality on screen, there were definitely areas that needed improvement. One of those areas was scheduling. We simply paced too many pages into two days, and the actors had to stay past their original hours. Although unacceptable, we learned our lesson for the next installment. Another area we suffered in was post-production. The slogan at Versa Studios Media, LLC is "Dream. Develop. Distribute." At this point, we were doing well at dreaming and developing, but not so much with distributing. The systems for post should have been set up well before we even got onto set, but instead, we all took a week off to recuperate after principal photography. The delegation of footage and audio wasn't handled efficiently, and we ended up completing *Rust* much later than we had hoped. However, due to this experience, Kenneth decided to develop a Versa server, that our company could use to download and transfer files from anywhere around the world in seconds. This server has helped to enhance the way we deal with post, and helped to ensure that our second installment, *Replica*, would be in good hands.

Replica was an opportunity for me to flex my filmmaking muscle as both a director and writer. The synopsis is as follows: “*In a not so distant future, breakthrough technology will allow for the cloning of human beings for those that can afford them. After 13-year-old Corinne becomes terminally ill, her wealthy aunt decides to bring the girls clone into the home for harvesting. When Corinne discovers her clone alone in the basement, they forge an unlikely bond that will ultimately force Corinne to make a life-altering decision.*” Two summers ago, Kenneth and I came up with the idea that we wanted to one day make a movie about clones someday. After we completed *Rust*, Kenny and I came up with a treatment for the story, and we agreed that we would co-direct the film together. We formulated a treatment, and sent it to a contracted writer, Adam King. While *Rust* had its issues in post-production, *Replica* had issues in pre-production. Two weeks before we were scheduled to start shooting, Adam sent his final draft to us. While it was written well, Kenny and I weren’t necessarily satisfied with the way the story was being taken. One of our advisory board members, Samantha Courter, expressed interest in helping to revise the screenplay. We handed it off to her, and with less than a week before we started shooting, she sent her draft back to us. While it was closer to Kenny and my vision, it was only 6 pages in length, and still not ready to go into production. This prompted one of the most stressful situations of my life, in which I took Sam’s draft and finished the fifteen-page screenplay in just two days. Our interns took the next couple of days to finalize and rework the schedule to prepare for the weekend’s three-day shoot. Our location was a complete 180 degrees in terms of quality. The story called for a very elegant, wealthy two-story home with an unfinished basement. Dylan was the First AD once again for this film, and he found the home of our fraternity

advisor, Mike Ashman, to be open to our production.

Even though I enjoy producing, directing is my one true love. I love working with actors and I love getting inside their heads to find out what makes them tick. One of the reasons why Kenneth and I decided to co-direct was because we will be co-directing our company's second feature film, *The Three*, this coming summer. *Replica* could serve as a testing grounds for us to improve our craft as well as work out any kinks. We recognized that having two directors sets up opportunity for confusion and chaos if its not handled correctly. We both agreed that only one actor should be working with the actors at any point in time. Actors are generally pretty sensitive, insecure individuals, and they are seeking for approval for their work. Our system is set up so that if I am working with the actors, then Kenneth is the "world director," in which he stays behind the camera and ensures that our vision is staying in tact. We switch off roles depending on which scenes we choose beforehand. On the set of *Replica*, our co-directing system worked out better than we ever expected it to on a first attempt. We believe we have gotten the best performances yet. However, there were a few moments when cast and crew were a little unsure of which "role" we were playing on set at a given moment. When crew would come up to me while I was working with actors, I'd have to stop and direct them to Kenny, and vice versa. We may have to figure out a way to physically distinguish ourselves with future projects; wearing a hat might have to be our solution. While post was much more efficient this time around, we underestimated how long it will take to color correct and score the film. We put the cut-to-time on the server so that Bobby Daley and Sean Sumwalt could work on it. Both of these individuals are very talented and take the time to work and then rework their craft. Though we planned on

screening *Replica* along with *Rust* for our Thesis screening, we simply didn't feel comfortable showing *Replica* in unfinished fashion.

In between our second and third *Cerebral* installments (*Replica* and *Skookum*) , Kenneth, Dylan, and myself started seeking out VOD solutions for our series. We found a website called Reelhouse.org, which is an online video community that provides filmmakers complete control to self-distribute content. At first it seemed too good to be true. We started reaching out to the administration at Reelhouse and they actually ended up creating a demo of what our *Cerebral* page would look like. It was slick, shiny, and impressive. Our Reelhouse page would have a space for trailers, behind the scenes videos, synopses, as well as the installments themselves. We could sell each episode for only three dollars a piece to online viewers. Finally, we were jumping on something that seemed marketable and legitimate. The only let back was that Reelhouse.com is still virtually unknown to the average internet user. We were making in investment in something that we knew might not take off for a couple years, if at all. As pre-production for our third installment approached, Kenneth, Dylan, and myself decided to keep our options open.

Our third *Cerebral* installment is titled *Skookum*, and the synopsis is as follows: "*A hunter, Neal, and his younger brother, Val, are contracted to do a job in the deep south. When they arrive, they find the contractor has been killed, leaving his capable daughter, Ruby, to watch over the land. As Neal and Val spend more and more time out in these woods, they come to realize that Ruby and her family have been hiding a malevolent secret regarding what which lurks in the shadows.*" Kenneth and I knew we wanted to take the Big Foot lore and spin it into something cerebral and unique. Today,

when people mention Big Foot or Sasquatch, it's usually followed by sarcastic looks or guffaws. Any opportunity to change public opinion is attractive to us. Kenneth and I decided that we wanted to co-direct once again, and we formulated another treatment, which we sent over to Ball State alumnus, Aaron Beal. Aaron wrote a wonderful first draft, which stayed fairly close to our original vision. Unfortunately, we ran into scheduling issues towards the end of the year, which kept us from beginning principal photography on *Skookum*. The interns were getting busy with finals and end of the year activities, and understandably so. We also ran into some location conflicts. Adamant to come out with something to show for, we were able to take a skeleton crew out to some Muncie woods and shoot some makeup test footage. We captured footage of one of our interns being dragged through the woods by a mysterious beast. Though we didn't show the beast itself, this was an opportunity to show off our makeup artist Jenny Steele, who also did work for *Rust* and *Skookum*. Jenny, a versa intern, was able to use this test footage to help her get class credit. *Skookum* will be shot over the summer on location in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky at the Van Buren pioneer village.

After our interns shot the makeup test footage for *Skookum*, Kenneth, Dylan, and myself shifted our focus back to solidifying a VOD model for *Cerebral*. While Reelhouse.org was a promising lead, we were still looking for that more popular outlet. Kenneth owns a Roku Streaming Player (or simply Roku), which is a set-top box that allows users to purchase and stream the hottest movies, TV shows, music, games, and more on your television. Doing some research, about thirty-seven percent of Americans who use VOD have a Roku. Recently, Roku came out with a Roku Software Developer Kit, which allows users to build a channel that streams your content to the TV. This was

a game changer for us. Kenneth and I quickly jumped on this exciting platform and developed a Versa Studios Media, LLC channel. It was one of the most breathtaking sights of the last four years, seeing our channel up there with big names like Netflix and HBO GO. The actual content on Roku is streamed through our Vimeo Pro account. What we also discovered is that Roku has a Reelhouse channel. Had we gone with Reelhouse, Roku users would have had to access Reelhouse's channel before searching for *Cerebral's* content. We were able to cut out a middle man by taking this route. Kenneth, Dylan, and myself had finally found a model that fit our needs and could take us to that next level. Now we just needed to test it out.

On April 30th, 2014, Dylan and I presented our honors thesis screening in the Letterman Building, room 121. There were forty seats in the room, and we filled them out easily. We created a Prezi to help our audience follow our presentation, as we took them through the history of our company and the creation of our *Cerebral* anthology series. We screened the completed version of *Rust*, as well as the makeup test footage for *Skookum*, and a teaser trailer for *Replica*. It was also exciting to be able to screen the intro to our *Cerebral* series, which links all of our installments together. The introduction is essentially a series of mysteriously intriguing shots with credits and a voiceover. The voiceover is as follows: "*Since the beginning, mankind has asked itself, "what if?" Immersing and culturing itself on an ever-developing planed, it looked to the future as an era of no loss. Day by day, the empty spots on the map were filled. Little by little, complacency became key. one by one, uncertainties were put to rest. But there are some aspects of our civilized world that still creep in and continue to haunt us. We embrace them. We continue to ask questions. For they are timeless. They are life-changing. They*

are CEREBRAL.”

In conclusion, the creation of the *Cerebral* anthology series has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life. Not only am I incredibly happy with the content that we have produced thus far, I am so proud to be working with such passionate and talented individuals. Watching the Versa interns learn and grow as filmmakers is rewarding, and I’ve had the opportunity to make connections that I will cherish for the rest of my life. *Cerebral* is a series that will entertain and enlighten in equal measure, and thanks to the VOD technology, we will be able to share creation with the entire world.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

LINK TO OUR PREZI PRESENTATION:

<http://prezi.com/0eqsjpfxcqzh/cerebral-an-anthology-series/>





